THE ALTENBURG CASE

By GEORGE DYRE ELDRIDGE

(Continued.)

"There is what I am trying to point out to you," he said, in turn laying his hand on her arm. "One can conceal only what one knows, not what one merely guesses. Keep those two things separate and that danger, and many others, will disappear."

Surely he had now said all that any one could or need to say to put her on her guard, but it seemed without effect to relieve her mind. With that he felt that the chance of instructing by implication was past and that the time had come for directness. When he spoke farther it was with abruptness bordering on rudeness:

"Stop guessing! Keep in mind only what you know, Miss Calden!"

"Alas," she said, "I know so much I've nothing left to guess! I came here with Horace and 'twas he and I carried John Altenburg upstairs!"

For a moment he was too surprised to speak. Then a great rush of light came to him and he spoke with assurance born of facts:

"Then you can't know, either of you, who did this thing?"

"But I know whom we came here expecting to find," she said.

"But do you believe," she asked, studying his face rather than waiting his words for her answer, as if her salvation depended on it, 'that the fact we did not find whom we expected does not prove him connected with what we did find?"

"I've got nothing to do with believing or not believing, nor have you," he said, desperately, fighting with the new presentation of the case he drew from her statement and question. "It's not my business to draw conclusions from facts. The state and Trafford will do all of that that is in anyways necessary or desirable. I'm simply to tell what I know. You do the same and stop short with what you do know actually."

"But I know I came here, we came here, expecting to find some one, and in place of finding him we found—this!"

"But a dozen other people might have been here before you came. I might have had an appointment with Altenburg—anybody might. There was nobody here to say who came or who did not come. Suppose, for instance, I'd come at half-past six, had seen him and had a quarrel with him, with the result that I had——"

"Don't!" she interrupted him, with a frightened face. "Don't make it any more horrible than it is! You don't know how dangerous the mere thinking of such things may be with that horrid man on our track."

"I'm not trying to make it horrible. I'm simply stating what it is possible, entirely possible, might have happened, and the very danger you suggest, and that terrifies you so, shows the dangerous nature of the speculations in which you have been indulging and on which your fear is based. After I'd been here I could have stolen back, through the woods, say, and been in my room an hour before I was called on the phone. As a matter of fact, I had come in a short time before. Do you suppose any one could prove I had been here if that was the question?"

The door of the sitting room opened and Calden joined them just as Grimbleshaw was done speaking.

"What is all this meant to prove?" he asked, struck by the earnestness in the faces of the two.

"Simply," replied Grimbleshaw, "that where so many things might have happened it's folly wasting time guessing which one did actually happen, let alone the chance that that one thing is the one of all others that you might not guess at all."

Calden drew him into his room before speaking again. Then he asked:

"You were at the camp last night?"

"Yes. Your mother expects you to come for her this morning as early as you can."

"Then father is not there now?"

This open speaking indulged in now by either of them for the first time served to mark the degree to which they had at last given him a part with themselves in this affair.

Still Grimbleshaw was unable to respond fully to the confidence they gave him, for he held the secret of another, given under conditions that forbade revelation. His professional training stood him in good stead to guard him against the danger of telling too much. He gave an outline of what had occurred, and the result, so far as the flight to Canada was concerned, but as left the details to be assumed and both accepted it as the better way. He consented to remain to breakfast, for it gave him another half hour or so with Judith, and, at Calden's suggestion, a boy was called by telephone who took the sleigh back to Lanceboro. This brought it back to the stable at the earliest possible moment, and it also enabled Grimbleshaw to return to town through the woods, by which means he might reach his rooms without it being known just when he did so.

"Of course Trafford knows that you and mother left town last night in that sleigh, if he's back from New York, as I suppose he is," said Calden, "and, of course, he'll know as soon as it is back and that it's been here. That much we can't stop. The important question is, how much does he know of what's happened between times?"

"By far too much," replied Grimbleshaw, as a basis for letting them know how closely the camp had been watched.

"The first thing I do nowadays," said Calden, "when anything happens is to ask myself, 'How soon will Trafford know it and what will he think of it?'"

"How do you make it out he'll interpret this?" asked Grimbleshaw.

"As indicating that in the waiting game he's playing he's won a point by making us move before we wanted to, and so uncover in part at least."

"Could we have helped it?' asked the doctor.

"Probably not," said Calden, "but that's not justification. That's weakness."

As soon as breakfast was over Calden hastened away to rescue his mother from what must be held imprisonment, and Grimbleshaw was left with Judith and the task of convincing her that she was in need of a morning walk, which she could best take through the woods, provided she had company, to come back by the highway. With opportunity he grew bold to what he would not have ventured twenty-four hours before.

"What do you fear for your father,' he asked, for he had determined, if possible, to get her mind to accept his version of the affair, "that they will take him back to the asylum?"

She grew so pale that he had a touch of fear lest, in his brutal application of his proposed remedy, he had acted too promptly. At the same time he recognized the probability that but a few hours were left in which to prepare for a move on Trafford's part, even if the time was not rather to be measured by minutes.

"That has ceased to seem to me so very dreadful," she gasped.

"I am positive," he said, "from what I now know that your father's only fear in connection with John Altenburg's death is that he may be called as a witness against some one who he thinks may have done this thing, but who, I am equally positive, could not possibly have done it."

He had looked to see instant relief show in her face and manner at this statement. Instead she staggered and came so near falling that he was compelled to support her.

"Don't you see," she asked, making a strong effort to recover herself, in which she but partially succeeded, "that whatever carries hope in one direction carries death to hope in the other? Was ever a daughter and a sister placed in such a cruel position?"

"But," he said, chagrined at her failure to weigh values, "you came here with Horace and know what happened. Therefore, if your father has no fear for himself——" He stopped short. It had become impossible to talk without saying or implying the most brutal things!

"But," she cried, "I don't know what Horace was doing, or even where he was, for two hours before he came to bring me here!"

XX.

WHAT SHE SAW AND DID AT THE ALTENBURG HOUSE.

Grimbleshaw was the first to recover from the shock of this sudden putting into words that which had knocked at the heart of each since they met. The time had come when he must give her actual help and not the mere pretense of it, or show himself wanting in all that was his ideal of manhood. Half the danger thus far, as he saw the situation now, arose from the lack of plain speaking, and he resolved to have done with that, even at the cost of wounding her again.

"Yes," he said, "but the most far-fetched conclusion from that is that he came here and murdered our uncle."

She flinched at the sound from another's lips of that which she herself had been thinking and brooding over, and on the instant denial sprang to her lips. Then she seemed to feel that help for her must come from this man, if at all, and braced herself to the cruel ordeal which was before her.

"You declare you are convinced it was not father." She spoke under clearly defined restraint, forcing herself to speak words that were a torture. "Who else than he or Horace had any motive?" She had said it at last and it stood out in all its hideous nakedness.

"I don't know. You didn't know. For all you know perhaps I did the deed. There are two hours of my time, from 6 to 8 that very evening, that it would be almost impossible for me to find witnesses to account for. How do you know that I didn't come here and do this job and then go home, ready to answer when called? There are people in Lanceboro who believe it at any rate."

"But what motive could there be, what possible motive?"

"A dozen. For one, it's said your uncle kept lots of money in the house. I'm hard up, in debt, spending all I make and sometimes a little more. A few thousands would put me on my feet. You haven't heard that any moneys have been found in the house since that night, have you?"

"Don't! Don't!" she exclaimed. "It is terrible enough without that!"

"Your uncle was a grinder and a skin-flint. He'd have a drop of blood out of a stone if the stone owed him it. Suppose some one whom he had ground down to the point of ruin was resolved not to go unrevenged?"

"Do you know of any such person?" she asked, almost a terror of hope sounding in her words.

"No. But there must be such, except, possibly, the final desperation of murder. Or here's David. He and your uncle were always quarreling, in fact, quarreled that very evening because David wanted a little of the money due him. Did anybody see your uncle alive after David left him and started for the village?"

"Oh, David hasn't the spirit," she began, whereupon he interrupted her: "It doesn't need the spirit of a house. After your uncle has abused the man he gives him a dollar with a curse and turns toward his desk. David has had a drink and is ugly. He sees the ruler, seizes it and strikes, harder probably than he meant to. All the same, intent or not, the thing is done——"

"Oh, please don't!" she pleaded. "Don't hint at such an injustice to poor David!"

"I'm not even hinting that such a thing occurred," said Grimbleshaw. "I'm simply showing you that by the same line of argument as that with which you have been frightening yourself this thing might be brought home to any number of people."

"But," she answered, "the motive that any of these could have had would be trivial, most trivial, beside the terrible wrongs that my father and brother had suffered at the hands of John Altenburg."

"The size of an injury or a motive," replied the other, "must have relation to the size of the man. Besides, I'm far from certain that both your father and brother aren't injured, rather than helped, by your uncle's death, in which case the motive would be the other way. I'm convinced that your uncle would have been a most important witness, under competent cross-examination, in establishing your father's innocence had his old case finally been brought to trial, as you have said he wanted it. More than that, I'm sure your father, of all people, realized this. That being the case, do you believe that any sense of injury suffered could be sufficient to induce him to kill his own witness, let alone the question of his being capable of doing it?"

"And that leads back again to poor Horace," she said, with a shudder.

"Nothing of the kind!" he exclaimed, himself convinced in his search for arguments to relieve her apprehensions. "While they always hunt for a motive to bolster up a suspicion of crime, it isn't sound to suspect crime from the mere existence of a possible motive. Besides, as I said before, this quarrel you make so much of was of years' standing, and nothing new had come up to add to it. I can't see a thing Horace had to gain by your uncle's death, and I can see that it might be a distinct loss at this time."

He was well aware he was putting to one side the matter of the money the family would secure as heirs to John Altenburg's estate; but this had clearly never occurred to her, and he was not making suggestions, however, palpable they might be to him, and as he knew they would be to others. He paused until he saw from her face that his words had served to a degree to lighten her fears, and then he added what he had, in delicacy, refrained from saying before, but which he felt that he must now try for if he was to do his best to comfort.

"You know, I don't know yet just what you came here for that night, or just what Horace did when you got here."

Judith looked at him in surprise. For the first time she seemed to realize that she had told him nothing that thus far it had been mere gropings in the dark that had helped him to what he was able to offer her of aid and comfort.

"We came here to get father," she said, "who had been concealed in mother's room since he got to Lanceboro, to take him to the camp at the lake. In addition to that, I think Horace had determined to try and extort from John Altenburg some admission of father's innocence of the defalcation with which he is charged. His plan was to bring father into the room and confront John Altenburg with him. He half believed that, under the stress of surprise and consternation, John Altenburg would be thrown off his guard and would betray himself. I never believed it possible."

"He thought Altenburg's testimony necessary to your father's acquittal?" asked Grimbleshaw.

"Father has always declared that he must have the testimony of John Altenburg or of another man, whose name is Clayton, I believe, who was employed by the syndicate. He did not think this would be gained by direct testimony, but by what he called 'cross-examination,' I think. The only other hope we had, and, of course, that came from father, too, was that among John Altenburg's papers we should find something that would help. I think father based this on a characteristic of Mr. Altenburg's, never to destroy any memorandum or paper, but to keep them all, as if they were money."

"Horace did not depend much on this chance?" asked Grimbleshaw.

"No," said Judith, "but how did you know?"

"He would argue as I would from general principles that any such paper or memorandum if it could clear your father could also convict Altenburg, and that, therefore, Altenburg's first care would be to destroy anything in that line, whatever might be his ordinary habit. Of course, we might all be wrong as far as the individual John Altenburg, is concerned, but we would be right with regard to ninety-nine men out of a hundred, and it isn't safe to hang a critical matter on the one possible exception."

"Well," said Judith, who had followed him with intentness, "that's about what Horace said, and while he wasn't going to throw away the chance that there might be papers, he put his chief dependence on John Altenburg, or the man Clayton, and he had not the least idea where Clayton was."

"Then," exclaimed Grimbleshaw, triumphantly, "we're working on a theory that Horace, who was anxious before everything to clear his father, came here and murdered the man whom he regarded as the only possible witness to clear his father! What kind of a theory do you call that?"

Judith looked at him and almost gasped.

"I hadn't thought of it that way before," she said.

"But isn't that it?" demanded Grimbleshaw. "Isn't it?"

"It looks that way," admitted Judith.

"Why are you afraid to say it is that way?" asked Grimbleshaw, gently, while in his earnestness he leaned forward and just touched her hand with the tips of his fingers.

"Because I am afraid to," she whispered. "I'm afraid it can't be so."

"Where is Clayton?" asked Grimbleshaw.

"Nobody seems to know," said Judith. "Indeed, so far as we know, he may be dead long ago."

"Why, I'd want corroborative evidence if Horace himself told me he murdered John Altenburg!" said Grimbleshaw, with some resentment at the imbecility of the theory sounding in his voice. "Oh, but about your father?" he added, recalling that she had said they cameto get him.

"When we got here he was gone, absolutely gone!" she answered, with a touch of fear in her tone.

"Gone!" he repeated. "Do you mean that he actually was not here when you arrived?"

"Exactly. We went to mother's rooms, where he was to remain, and they were empty. You did not see anything of him when you came?" she asked, as if a sudden thought came to her from his question.

"Nothing. Indeed, I knew nothing of his being here until I got that letter on which I came to warn you. Did you go direct to your mother's rooms when you got here?"

"As soon as Horace had cut the telephone wire."

"What, was it Horace who cut that wire?"

"Why, yes. 'Twas this way: We left our horses back of the barn, ready in case we had to leave suddenly. Then we came across to the rear door and were just going in when Horace stopped suddenly and said, 'We'll not have him calling in help till we've got what we want from him. Wait in the passage and I'll go round and cut the telephone wire.' He opened the door and I stepped into the passage. It was sort of creepy waiting there, and it seemed a long time before he got back. When he did he said, 'John Altenburg is in the kitchen and the rest of the house is dark, and that isn't light by a long shot. Just a candle.' We went in, expecting to find father downstairs waiting, but it was pitch dark. Horace ran upstairs and found that room dark and empty too. I was frightened, and I think Horace was too, but he put on a bolder air. 'He couldn't have gone to talk to John Altenburg alone, could he?' I asked. 'Impossible!' he said, but I knew by his tone that that was the very thing he was afraid of. 'I'll find out in a minute,' he added. He wasn't gone over three minutes, when he came back, looking terribly pale and frightened, and said, 'Something has happened. John Altenburg is hurt and we must get him up to his room. We are the only people in the house.' I knew by that that father wasn't there, and I knew, too, without his saying it, that he thought father had hurt John Altenburg. Of course, I was more frightened when I saw how badly he was hurt, but I braced myself to the work and we got him upstairs."

"But when," demanded Grimbleshaw, in whose mind one fact demanding explanation had held dominance over all others, "did your brother telephone me?"

"He didn't telephone you at all," she replied. "Didn't I tell you he cut the wire before we went into the house?"

"Then the message had been sent before you got there! Who in time—," and he stopped short, startled by the expression of her face. Of course her father was the man at the telephone, and, of course——; but he stopped there with his thought and caught his breath.

(To be Continued.)

FASHIONS AND FADS

Pockets, big, ornamental flap affairs, are sometimes set low on the sides of coats, breaking the straight loose line or finishing a side panel.

Marabout flowers will take a considerable place among hat trimmings this season in spite of the fact that they cost about twice as much as last year.

Travel hats are already here and aer of the lightest possible make of felt. Some of them are turned up sharply at one side, the so-called "left side tilt."

Some of the most striking fall gowns are rich in handwork. For braiding a heavy silk cord is used instead of the flat braid so popular last season.

Instead of a plain finish, some of the satins have a dull, crepelike finish. These, with the soft shades, are particularly beautiful for house or evening gowns.

Black lynx promises to be as fashionable as last year, which will be welcomed as good news, for it is a becoming fur and can be worn for both day and evening occasions.

The most noticeable thing about new blouses, is the tiny puff in some of the sleeves. Some are fuller at the top, too, and hardly any are made long or close fitting.

Late Paris fashions in wraps are introducing some startling picture effects designers drawing from all periods and all lands in the shaping of cloaks and manties.

Some of the most striking chiffons and gauzes, whether designed for scarfs or evening gowns, are embossed in velvet. The velvet is of the lightest weight quality.

Veiling of gold or silver tissues with transparencies is one of the prevalent fancies. In line with it is the interweaving of gold or silver thread in rich moires of otherwise solid color with the effect of a shimmering background